

BELGRAVIA

A LONDON MAGAZINE

CONDUCTED BY

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VOL. II.—JUNE 1867

Office :

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HOW MY DEBTS WERE PAID

BY THE AUTHOR OF "LADY FLAVIA," ETC.

It was the accident of birth—so I was vehemently assured by a very energetic Chartist lecturer with whom I travelled from Kenmare to Killarney, on one of Bianconi's jaunting-cars; it was the accident of birth that gave my name a place in *Debrett* and on the Lord Lieutenant's list of aides-de-camp. And I am sure that it was the accident of fortune—which in my case meant the not having any—that kept me, the Hon. Augustus Mildmay, after eight or nine years unprofitably spent, still a subaltern in Her Majesty's Brigade of Guards.

My story was a common one enough, so far. I was a younger son, brought up to indulge expensive tastes and to form expensive habits, and then suddenly cut adrift to sink or swim as best I might, with the lifebuoy of a very modest patrimony in addition to my lieutenant's pay. It is not easy for a guardsman to practise thrift; and our battalion, in particular, had a reputation for ultra extravagance. There were rich men among us, and there were poor men; but we all spent more than we had, and with the usual result that attends such a seed-time of wild oats. There had been all sorts of complicated bill transactions, playfully known as kite-flying—dangerous playthings are those same kites, soaring high and proudly only to topple down with an ugly crash upon the luckless wight that launched them—and the collapse had come. What was the exact amount or nature of our indebtedness no one seemed to know. We were all liable for one another, in the most intricate maze of mutual obligation; but a scapegoat was necessary, and I was, somehow or other, more deeply dipped in the quagmire of impecuniosity than the rest of us.

Corker, the knowing wine-merchant of Conduit-street—(we always went to Corker when perplexed by legal difficulties: he was pleasanter than a regular lawyer, and had indeed been an attorney himself before taking to the wine trade)—Corker, the most good-natured of men, hard-headed as he was, and who always gave us a very tidy tap of sherry during these consultations, was decidedly of opinion that I must leave London, if I wished to avoid an arrest. "Mr. Mildmay," such was the opinion of our Anacreontic adviser, "would very likely find himself in Queer-street, which in this case meant Whitecross-street prison, unless he went abroad for a time, till a composition could be effected."

Too true. Before long, lawyers' letters of the most alarming character, closely followed up by ominous bits of stamped paper, the

contents of which were couched in a horrid legal jargon unintelligible to even the most experienced of our field-officers, began to pour in; and men with black whiskers, hook noses, and an aspect disagreeably suggestive of Cursitor-street, were observed skulking about the barrack-gates and lounging near the steps of our club. Then I was advised to feign illness and apply for sick leave; was smuggled into a hansom cab, and reaching the railway terminus in safety, breathed more freely as I found myself rattling down to Dover at the full speed of the early express. Markham, one of ours, who had arranged the details of this Hegira of mine, accompanied me to the station; and as the train moved off, his last words were ringing in my ears: "Good-bye, Mildmay! good luck to you, old fellow. Let us know how you enjoy yourself in Paris. I quite envy you the trip; but mind you soon come back to us, Gus, my boy."

But if Captain Markham, in his kindly wish to raise my drooping spirits, spoke thus cheerily, I was very far from feeling myself an object of envy as I was borne whirling along through the rich Kentish landscape, hop-gardens and orchards, meadows and wooded hills, smiling peacefully in the early sunlight of the summer's morning. My prospects were dark enough. The precise sum total of what I owed, on behalf of myself and my brother officers, I really did not know; but I could as soon from my own resources have liquidated the National Debt as have settled scores with Messrs. Shadrach of Chancery-lane. My only hope—and that a vague one—was that my eldest brother would shell out, "for the credit of the family;" but the odds against John's paying my debts were overwhelming. There were five of us cadets knocking about the world,—in the army, in the diplomatic service, or as gentlemen at large, like poor Tom at Baden; and the precedent of discharging a younger brother's liabilities would have been a dangerous one. The present lord was married too, and had children of his own to provide for; and his wife was a very prudent woman. John was naturally kind; but I could not expect such a tremendous sacrifice on his part as the payment of those hydra-headed bills and notes-of-hand implied. Meanwhile I had leave; but leave, even with a guardsman, cannot last for ever. The time must come when I should be reduced to the delightful alternative of selling out for the benefit of creditors, or of returning home, with the certainty of being arrested on the parade-ground. These were bitter reflections, and they were rendered none the more palatable by the remembrance that all this ruin was brought about by my own folly and my own fault. Did ever, I wonder, a man take comfort from the consciousness that he had fallen into a pit of his own digging, or that he had no one but himself to blame for bringing a wasps'-nest of duns and bailiffs about his bankrupt ears? Whoever of the passengers in that early express flying seaward may have enjoyed the beauties of nature and the calm joyousness of the unclouded morning, of a certainty it was not Lieutenant and Captain the Hon. Augustus Mildmay, as

the little gilt-edged volumes of drawing-room literature were pleased to style me.

Fine as the day was, I was surprised, on reaching Dover, to find how very rough a passage lay before me. There had been nearly a week of boisterous weather; and although the wind had lulled, the sea was still dark and angry, and the hoarse growl of the surges, as they broke upon the solid stonework of the Admiralty pier, was like the smothered roaring of wild beasts. Far out at sea, the white wave-crests flashed up into sight for an instant and then vanished again in endless succession, and the steamer jerked and heaved uncomfortably even in her snug mooring-place beside the massive jetty. But all this, which might have made mere pleasure-seekers hesitate, was nothing to a gentleman in imminent peril of the peremptory hospitality of that imperious Amphitryon, Mr. Sheriff's-officer Grab of Cursitor-street; so I went on board at once, with such light luggage as I had been able to bring away with me. The bell was already ringing clamorously as I set foot on the deck.

There were not many passengers. London was very full just then; and it was too early for the annual migration of the jaded votaries of the season, and yet too late for the exodus of those sober families with children to educate and plans of retrenchment and continental residence that may be met with every spring upon the Rhine and elsewhere. The bell clanged out a second warning; ropes were run inboard, hawsers were cast off, the gangway planks were withdrawn, and the paddle-wheels began to revolve. Just as we were in motion there was a shout and an entreaty to stop, and somebody came hurrying to the edge of the pier. My first idea was that the Jews had been too many for me after all, and that the noisy individual on shore was no other than an emissary of Messrs. Shadrach, armed with a *ne exeat regno* for my discomfiture. But one glance sufficed to show me that this late arrival was a *bonâ fide* passenger; a tall, shambling, high-shouldered, awkward fellow, with a red head and flame-coloured whiskers, high cheek-bones, and a travelling-suit of black-and-white tweed, in the loudest of loud patterns, monstrous chequers of black and white, like the squares of a backgammon-board. He was followed by a panting porter, who carried his effects,—hat-box, dressing-case, trunk, and rugs; and he vociferated a petition to be taken on board. But the captain shook his head. He was a tough, wary old Channel commander, and had had too much experience to risk the rasping off the weather-boards of his starboard paddle-box against the piles of the pier by any undue reversal of the engine. "Too late, sir," he answered;—"go on ahead!" And ahead we went, leaving the intending passenger standing disconsolate, like a male Ariadne of clumsy figure and queer attire, on shore. Nobody seemed much to compassionate poor Redhead's disappointment; on the contrary, a funny bagman near me dubbed him "the Chancellor of the Ex-chequer," on account of the pattern of his travelling costume; and

there was a general laugh at this mild witticism. Then we got beyond the bar, and into very rough water, with a wet deck and showers of spray; and after a miserable passage we reached Calais five-and-thirty minutes behind time. The train, however, made up in extra speed for the delay occasioned by the Channel swell, and we arrived at Paris with tolerable punctuality.

Followed by a porter, who carried my scanty store of personal property—merely a portmanteau and a hat-box—I sallied out of the great gloomy hall where the baggage is distributed to its respective owners, and emerging on the outer platform, bade the man call me a *fiacre*. I knew Paris so far as an occasional fortnight's holiday enables an Englishman to know it; and I meant, for the present at any rate, to take up my abode in my old quarters at the Hotel du Louvre. The porter did as he was bid; but scarcely had he set down my luggage upon the asphalté of the pavement before a chasseur in a splendid livery—one of those gorgeous retainers whose cocked hat, white plumes, and gold aiguillettes and embroidery are worthy of a field-marshal—came bustling up, and took one glance at my hat-box and portmanteau—which bore, I must observe, my initials, A.M., in brass nails—and another at myself. "This way, if Monsieur please!" said the man in villanous English, but with infinite respect, lifting his feathered hat with a flourish. I stared at him. "Madame attends—*voyez plutôt!*" said the chasseur, calling my attention to a handsome barouche that had been drawn up at the edge of the platform, and the only occupant of which was a lady, very well dressed, and who was waving her gloved hand, and smiling and bowing and beckoning, obviously to me. She was a perfect stranger to me, this lady; and at first I turned my head, in the idea that I should see at my elbow the friend to whom these nods and becks and wreathed smiles were addressed; but no. No one was near me but a brace of bagmen, a German governess in tinted spectacles, and a stout French citizen with a nankeen coat and a green umbrella.

"Augustus! Gussy!" exclaimed the smiling lady—who was not, I may remark, as young as she used to be—a well-preserved, upright, commanding-looking dame, with aquiline features and a tall figure. She was richly dressed, and in excellent taste; while her equipage, from the magnificent horses, that rattled their silver-mounted harness as they chafed against the bit, to the stately English coachman, solemn as an undertaker and rosy as a carnation, was one that would have passed muster even in Hyde Park. I knew Paris sufficiently well to be aware that none but people of large fortune and lavish expenditure were in the habit of maintaining so well-appointed a carriage as that. But why the proprietress of all these splendours, and whom to the best of my remembrance I had never seen before, should hail me thus familiarly by my name, I could not conceive.

"Some mistake," I said; but the chasseur would take no denial, and I found myself impelled towards the barouche. Its mistress held out

her hand, nay, both hands, towards me as I lifted my hat and stared at her in a bewildered fashion that I am sure must have been ludicrous enough.

"Why, Augustus! why, you naughty boy! were you actually going to give me the cut direct?" And she gave me a playfully reproachful tap over the knuckles with her lace-bordered parasol.

"Really, madam," I stammered, "I am afraid—that is—"

"I see how it is," said my persecutress, clapping her hands together with unaffected delight. "The child has really forgotten me. That is too bad; but I told the girls it would be so. I should have known you, dear boy, anywhere."

This was very embarrassing. I tried to smile, but for the very life of me I could not find appropriate words in which to convince the lady of her mistake. She seemed so positive too, so certain of the truth of her own impressions, that I was staggered. My own memory was, I knew, a tolerably good one, but I might be wrong; and, after all, faces *do* sometimes escape our recollection in the most provoking and unaccountable manner. While these contradictory thoughts were passing through my puzzled brain, the lady of the barouche was rattling on, best pace, with a flow of words that seemed exhaustless. Yes, she vowed the family likeness would have enabled her to identify me anywhere. What a passage I must have had! *Fâchée!* What did that man mean by saying that Monsieur's *fiacre* waited, when she had brought her carriage into that out-of-the-way quarter of Paris on purpose to fetch me? I was one of the privileged. There were very few whom she would have met at a horrid railway station. Let Anatole (the chasseur) look to my luggage; and as for me, why didn't I get into the barouche?

It was done. Before I could frame a proper remonstrance I found myself hustled, so to speak, with gentle violence, into the carriage. "Home," was the word; the plumed chasseur sprang nimbly to his perch, and sat there like an enormous gold-and-green parrot, with a white cockatoo's crest of feathers to supplement his own gorgeous array; and I found myself sitting beside this new old friend of mine, and listening, half distracted, to her incessant babble of small-talk, as the splendid bays whirled us far from the mercantile district in which stands the busy terminus of the Northern Railway.

"What sort of a French scholar was I? Ah, a bad one, no doubt, like most young Englishmen. I was always an idle boy at my lessons, and it was partly her (the lady's) fault; for of course I remembered how she used to spoil me, long ago."

Little by little, this discourse lulled my nerves into a state of calm repose, pretty much as I have heard our assistant-surgeon at mess describe to be the case with Indian serpents soothed by the flute of the snake-charmer. Once or twice the wild idea occurred to me that I might be the victim of a mystification or the dupe of a monomaniac.

of your name ; if I was a playmate of your eldest daughter, it must have been in a previous state of existence, or I must be a sleep-walker without knowing it ; the only link between us is that you call me familiarly by my Christian name, and that I answer to the call, as a stray dog will do if you summon him correctly as Tray or Rover." But I did nothing of the sort. False shame, awkwardness, and a vague sentiment of curiosity combined to put a padlock on my lips, and I merely murmured some unmeaning inanities about the weather, the sea-passage, and everybody's exceeding kindness.

Very kind indeed they all were, and I found myself a valued guest, and was bidden to consider myself at home. The bedroom assigned to me was a very handsome one ; and the huge pier-glasses, gilded cornices, and silken hangings, were all of the very best and most sumptuous of their order. People dine earlier in Paris than in London, so that by the time my toilet was complete it was almost dinner-time. A better dinner,—considering that it was no grand gala-day, but a quiet *repas de famille*, as my hostess, who had a pestilent knack of bringing out little scraps of French in the course of her fluent small-talk, was pleased to call it,—a better dinner no man need wish to eat, and I have seldom sipped better wine. There was a display of plate that gave me an exalted idea of the pecuniary circumstances of my entertainer ; and the French majordomo was as solemn, and very much more intelligent than even a prize London butler. As for the manner in which I was treated, that left nothing to be desired ; and as my reserve thawed a little under the benign influence of Clicquot's champagne and some wonderful Burgundy, that I rather think had been bought at the auction of Talleyrand's cellars, the young ladies and I became very good friends. I was particularly struck and pleased with Miss Laura, the eldest, and the one with whom I was supposed to have trundled hoops and chased butterflies at some remote period of our childhood.

It must not be supposed that our conversation turned wholly upon the past, or was made up of reminiscences, more or less genuine ; and I confess to having perpetrated some tremendous fibs regarding mythical swings and imaginary daisy-chains and games at shuttlecock—fibs of the "don't-you-remember" class, which had an undeserved success, and were received in perfect good faith. No. There was much desultory talk about the gaieties and routine of Parisian fashionable life, and the names of a great many foreigners of rank,—Russian, German, Polish, French as well,—were often introduced ; so that I felt tolerably certain that my entertainers, whoever they were, moved in some of the most brilliant circles of the *beau monde* of Paris.

A very agreeable evening followed the so-called family-dinner, and I found myself getting on swimmingly towards an intimate friendship with a set of delightful people, whose very names were unknown to me. That circumstance, however, did not distress me so much as perhaps it should have done. My new allies seemed to know me so well, to take so

sincere an interest in me, and to be so thoroughly contented with their guest, that I not unnaturally took it for granted that they must be the best judges of what was fitting. I was constantly addressed by my Christian name, as Augustus, 'Gus, or Gussy; and a man of a more angular nature than mine could hardly have failed to feel himself at home with entertainers so charming, frank, and unaffectedly kind. As for myself, I had always possessed somewhat of the *laissez aller* temperament of a lotus-eater, and now, in this haven of rest into which my wandering barque had somehow been wafted, I gave myself up to the calm enjoyment of the hour, without a thought of the future and without an apprehension of the possible result.

Laura, the elder sister, sang very sweetly; and at my request she had just begun one of my favourite English ballads—to which her clear bell-like voice added an effect that co-operated with her sunny smile and the liquid lustre of her eyes in playing mischief with the heart of Augustus Mildmay—when the sleek majordomo glided into the room and whispered something to my hostess. That lady started, and looked first incredulous, and then angry. She rose from her seat—"Let him leave the house at once. I never heard of such effrontery!" she exclaimed, in a harsher tone than I had thought to hear from her lips; and then I caught the servant's muttered reply;—"So positive. Insists on seeing madame!" "Let him be turned out at once. Call the *garde* if he refuses to go," said the mistress of the house, arching her black eyebrows; "or, stay, I *will* see the wretch, since he presumes." And she left the room.

Immediately afterwards I heard a confused sound of voices, most of them voluble in French, a noise as of scuffling, and then the slamming of a door. My hostess came back with a dignified air, but with a heightened colour. She made a sort of apology for the recent disturbance. "An impudent impostor," she declared, "had just had the audacity to present himself at the hotel, pretending to be—what did I suppose? what did the girls suppose?—why, Gussy, of all people in the world. She had never known, with all her experience of Parisian roguery, so barefaced an attempt at imposition. And yet the trick, though a clever one as to its design, had been ill carried out. The "creature" who had just been ignominiously hustled out of doors by the servants was an ugly, uncouth person, whom one glance sufficed to detect, and he had not the slightest likeness to any of the family. "As if I should not have known my own nephew!" the lady added, patting me affectionately on the shoulder.

After this, I think that Laura sang again; but even to her musical voice my ear remained insensible, while my bewildered brains seemed to be performing a saraband in harmony with the notes of the piano accompaniment. "Her own nephew!" My stately hostess had uttered the words in all seriousness. Was I dreaming, or had the wonderful Burgundy bemused my faculties to such a pitch that I could not trust

my own senses? Had I, in some un conjectured way, become an inmate of a private lunatic asylum, and were my new friends the victims of some strange delusion? Or was it possible that I was myself the dupe of some extraordinary hoax, more complicated and better sustained than any since the days of the caliph Haroun Alraschid? Impossible! And yet, could it be that I had more aunts than I was aware of, and that I had stumbled unawares upon a tribe of unsuspected relatives? all of whom, however, knew all about my unworthy self, and—

My dream was rudely broken. Again—and this time with a very ominous expression of face—the smooth majordomo glided in, bringing with him on a silver-gilt salver a card, which he offered for the inspection of his mistress, while he murmured a few words in French, the purport of which I did not catch. “Mr. Studleigh, of the English Embassy!” exclaimed the mistress of the mansion. “It is very extraordinary. Show them in, Dupont, at once.” And for the first time my new-found aunt appeared to cast a scrutinising and almost a suspicious glance at me.

Dupont bowed and left the room, but instantly returned, ushering in two gentlemen; one of whom, a middle-aged dandy in a wig and dyed whiskers, was evidently one of those steady-going veterans of minor diplomacy whose experience of court balls, protocols, circulars, and *précis*-writing, renders them the pillars of our British legations abroad. This elderly emissary of the Foreign Office had some slight acquaintance with my hostess; and as he came forward, bowing, she advanced and offered him her hand. But who was the individual at Mr. Studleigh’s side? I actually rubbed my eyes, in the desperate hope that the whole affair might turn out to be a vision of the night, which one waking moment would banish for ever. No; rub as hard as I might, there was still before my eyes the uncompromising fact that, confronting me, stood tall, shambling, awkward, high-shouldered, rueful, resentful Redhead himself—the identical traveller in the checked garments, and with the flaming whiskers, who had been just too late for the steamer on Dover pier. There he was, glaring at me as fiercely as if he had been an ogre.

Meanwhile a rapid interchange of question and answer had been going on between my entertainer and the *attaché*, or whatever he was; and presently I caught the words, “Know him perfectly well. Met him at Lord Glenlusk’s, in County Donegal, where I stayed for the salmon-fishing last year. Met him just now, bewildered in the street, awfully excited. He told me you had disavowed him for your nephew, and that the servants assured him that your real nephew had arrived hours before. I—” But here the mistress of the house turned frowningly to me.

“I begin to be afraid, sir,” she said, “that you have been practising most unwarrantably upon our simplicity. Are you my nephew? Are you Augustus Metcalfe?”

"Let him say so—only let the scoundrel say so—and I'll break every bone in his skin," roared Redhead, clenching a huge big-knuckled fist; and he made a dash at me, but Mr. Studleigh grasped his arm, while the young ladies chorused a cry of alarm that brought the vigilant majordomo back again.

Then followed a long and lively scene of reproaches, questionings, explanations, and apologies. My position was not an enviable one. It was soon made apparent that Redhead, of the loud-patterned travelling-dress and blazing whiskers, was the real Simon Pure; the long-expected nephew of the elder, and cousin of the younger, ladies; Laura's ex-playfellow, and the rightful occupant of the handsomely-furnished bedroom into which I had, on false pretences, been inducted. His identity was established; while I was regarded as a detected impostor, who had most unpardonably personated the welcome guest, and who had permitted myself to be fed on the fat of the land, to be caressed and kindly entreated, when all the time I was perhaps guilty of evil intentions towards the spoons. I heard Mr. Studleigh whisper to Dupont to send for the police; but for that I cared little. What really gave me pain was to see the bright faces of the girls so sad and indignant.

"As you are not Augustus, sir—" began my hostess, with a withering contempt.

"But I am Augustus!" I exclaimed recklessly; "for heaven's sake, madam, listen to me for one moment. You call me a deceiver; but pray consider if you have not deceived yourself and me too throughout. You addressed me invariably as Augustus. I can't help my Christian name. This"—drawing out my card-case—"will prove that I have a right to bear it; and if you can convict me of having told you a single untruth, I'll cheerfully put up with the heaviest punishment of your merited contempt." And I held out my card.

"Mr. Augustus Mildmay, of the Guards: not one of old Lord Porchester's sons, surely!" exclaimed the black-browed lady. "Why, what a coincidence! You are not my nephew certainly; but we are cousins, after all."

And so it proved to be. A long and amicable conversation succeeded to the recent wordy storm, and many dark things were made clear. My hostess was in very truth a distant relation of our family; Mrs. Sharpe, the wealthy widow of old Sharpe, of Diddlecot Hall, a great parliamentary agent and attorney in his day, and to whose tenacious fingers much money of bribe-giving candidates had adhered. Mrs. Sharpe was herself the daughter of a coastguard lieutenant, and her one claim to connection with the aristocracy was the fact that her mother had been a Mildmay, and a cousin of my father's. She had inherited a large fortune from her aged husband, and had done the best with it for herself and her pretty daughters by spending it in Paris, where she lived in excellent style, and where she found her wealth an easier pass-

port into good French society than it would have proved in the more cold and critical penetralia of Belgravia. Harmony once more prevailed in the establishment, and I was heartily made welcome in my own character, and was pressed to remain as a guest in the mansion which I had entered as an unconscious impostor. And, to cut short a story that threatens to expand to undue proportions, before the end of six weeks I was the affianced lover of charming Laura Sharpe, my cousin; and in due course we were married at the Embassy Chapel, my debts being very liberally paid by my quondam "aunt" and present mother-law, who, at the same time, made a sufficient settlement on Laura to enable us to live in London. As for Redhead—or Augustus Metcalfe—in spite of his ungainly appearance, he turned out to be the best of good fellows, and we had many a good-humoured laugh together over the exciting commencement of our acquaintance. He is, I believe, now paying his addresses to my sister-in-law, Miss Emma, who used at first to tease him unmercifully, but is gradually relenting. I am sure I wish him luck with all my heart.
